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By the time he was 12, Tim said, he was dealing drugs as a member of a Joliet street gang.

That was the year he had a disturbing conversation with his father, a member of a different gang.

"He said, 'If you're gonna sell, you might as well sell big, because you're gonna get the same time (in jail) anyway,'æ" said Tim, who declined to give his last name.

Now an 18-year-old who admits to an extensive criminal history and years of personal drug abuse, Tim can't understand why a father would give a son such appalling advice.

"Why would you want your kid to live this way?" said Tim, who said he's now sober but still hangs with a gang. "It shouldn't be like that. You shouldn't have to be born into that kind of environment."

But plenty of kids are. Law-enforcement agencies throughout the Chicago area encounter children of street gang members who have followed in their parents' footsteps.

Police evidence suggests some parents deliberately bring their kids into the gang life, dressing infants in gang colors and teaching toddlers how to throw gang signs.

Such situations frustrate authorities fighting to keep kids on a straight path. Battling gang crime becomes harder, too.

"It makes it 20 times more difficult when I know the 14-year-old kid coming out of a car doesn't have any respect for police, and that's because of mom and dad," said Waukegan police Sgt. Domenic Cappelluti, who leads an anti-gang team.

Newer in suburbs

Cappelluti believes 30 to 50 percent of the gang members in Waukegan have parents or other relatives with gang ties. The figure is lower in other towns, authorities said.

The multi-generational phenomenon is newer in the suburbs than in Chicago, police say, possibly because gangs have operated in the city since the 1940s but generally didn't achieve suburban footholds until the 1980s and '90s.

Some gang parents set out to raise their children in that life and instill a distrust of police and authority at a young age. Tim said his dad "always told me gangbanging was all right."

"What your parents tell you, it's what you believe," he said.

Local anti-gang units have photographs of little children throwing gang signs and babies wearing their parents' gang colors. Some officers have seen nurseries festooned in gang regalia.

In other families, parents tell children not to follow them into the gang life, but still surround them with drugs, guns and other unlawful influences. That lack of proper guidance infuriates Cappelluti.

"If you don't want your kid to gangbang, you have to lead by example," he said. "You don't wear gang colors 24/7. You don't invite people over to smoke dope. You have a legitimate job."

Police can be somewhat sympathetic when they meet kids in these circumstances. Hoffman Estates police Sgt. Mike Collins recalls the case of a 20-year-old gang member arrested last year after shooting at a rival.

The suspect's mom was a gang member, too, Collins said.

"That's a tough situation for the kid," said Collins, who leads his department's tactical unit. "What kind of role model has he had?"

'The family tree'

Nineteen-year-old Omar Davila practically grew up in a gang on Chicago's North Side. His dad and two older brothers were members, and he joined up when he was 8.

Davila said he started out delivering packages of drugs and hiding guns for older members. His first arrest - for marijuana possession - came at 10, he said. Dozens more followed, as did time in juvenile facilities.

"I thought that's what you were supposed to do," he said of his illicit lifestyle. "It was the family tree. It's a path we all took."

Parents aren't the only relatives who inspire youngsters to join gangs. Miguel Camacho of Carpentersville said he hooked up with a local gang because older cousins were part of a Milwaukee branch. He was 12.

"I saw how they got girls, and they had money, and how people were scared of them," said Camacho, now 21. "And I wanted people to be scared of me."

Authorities say familial connections to gangs, especially parental ties, entrench members in gangs and encourage the expansion of a gang subculture.

"(When) everybody in the family is part of the business, it begins to look more like La Cosa Nostra than a local group of toughs," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, referring to the notorious crime syndicate.

Kirk, a Highland Park Republican who has secured federal funding for local anti-gang efforts, accompanied Waukegan police this year when they arrested a 13-year-old gang member who had two handguns and dozens of fake ID cards in his bedroom. The boy's father was in the same gang, Kirk recalled.

"You worry that we could be losing this struggle," he said.

Family ties also make it hard for authorities to help young gang members or wannabes before they commit serious crimes. When gangs were becoming a suburban problem a few decades ago, police officers could reach out to parents distraught over a child's first arrest and give them advice.

But the message gets lost when the parents are in gangs, too.

"It's so much more difficult when mom and dad come in (after a kid's arrest) and dad's a 'banger and we've arrested dad 20 times, and he says, 'If you talk to the police, I'm gonna kick your ass,' " Cappelluti said.

Different approaches

Concerned about not being able to get through to some kids and parents, Cappelluti and other anti-gang officers now bring their fight to teachers and school administrators. They tell educators how to recognize the latest gang signs, colors and lingo, and they instruct them who

to contact if they suspect students are involved with gangs.

"If they have that information up their sleeves, it works wonders," Cappelluti said.

Round Lake Beach police took a different approach when they formed an anti-gang unit last year. Instead of waiting to investigate gang crimes, the unit makes living and operating in the village extremely difficult for gang members.

Investigators knock on doors at night to see if anyone's breaking court-imposed curfews. They work with building department employees to crack down on people who have let homes become gang hangouts. They stop and search gang members on the street and drive any juveniles home.

The high-pressure strategy gives gang members three options, Lt. Rich Chiarello said: stop illegal activity, do it somewhere else or get arrested.

And it seems to be working. Gang-related crimes in Round Lake Beach dropped 58 percent in 2004, according to the department. And as gang crime has decreased, so has the number of active gang families in town, Chiarello said.

"But that's not to say tomorrow it won't increase 150 percent," he said. "We don't bury our heads in the sand and say we don't have any problems here."

A faith-based organization called Gang Outreach is trying to break the generational chain, too. The not-for-profit group hosts athletic and social activities and provides religious ministering to current and former gang members from throughout the Chicago area.

Not all of the Mundelein-based group's clients have parents with gang ties, but many do. Outreach director John Hernandez believes modern society lacks the "moral compass" of previous generations, which leads to members of the same family joining gangs.

"(Some) parents don't know right from wrong, and they think this is right," said Hernandez, of Gurnee. "(We try to) replace their negative belief system with a positive belief system."

Davila is among the young people who have sought support from Gang Outreach. He is on parole and off drugs, doesn't associate with gang members anymore and is working toward a general equivalency diploma.

He regrets the destructive influence his father and brothers had on his life.

"I know that if I wasn't gangbanging and stayed in school, I could've been somebody," he said. "I didn't get a chance to live my younger years. As I get older, I realize that."

Tim - another Gang Outreach client - is remorseful about his gang past, too, but he isn't confident he can break from it.

"There's a part of me that don't want that life anymore," he said. "And there's a part of me that says it's never going to change."